

Tobacco in the Retail Environment

Fact Sheet

Overview: Why Does the Tobacco Retail Environment Matter?

High levels of tobacco advertising and promotion remain in retail stores while tobacco advertising in most other areas – such as television and billboards – is restricted. Exposure to tobacco marketing in retail stores increases youth tobacco experimentation and uptake, and prevents current users from successfully quitting.

- Nationwide, the tobacco industry spent \$10.5 billion (\$28+ million each day) on advertising and promotion of its products in 2008. Nearly 90 percent of industry spending in this category was directed towards price promotion and price discounting strategies to increase retail sales.^{1,2}
- Between 1998 and 2008, tobacco industry spending on product marketing in California increased by more than 30 percent, from \$504.3 million to \$656.3 million.^{1,3,4}
- Today there are approximately 36,700 licensed tobacco retail stores in California – one for every 254 kids.^{5,6} These tobacco retail stores display an average of 17.6 cigarette marketing materials and 3.2 smokeless tobacco marketing materials.⁷
- In 2008, about 90 percent of California tobacco retail stores had at least one cigarette advertising material near the point of sale, up from 68 percent in 2002.^{7,8}
- In 2008, chain convenience stores that don't sell gasoline had the most cigarette marketing materials of any type of store in California, with an average of 22.5 per store, as well as the most smokeless marketing materials with an average of 8.2 per store.⁷
- Over half (51.4 percent) of California chain convenience stores that don't sell gasoline had at least one cigarette marketing material below three feet, easily visible by small children.⁷
- Lower cigarette prices, increased density of tobacco retailers, and higher levels of advertising are associated with more positive attitudes and beliefs about smoking and higher rates of youth smoking.⁹
- Exposure to cigarette advertising increases the likelihood that youth will start to smoke, while the availability of price promotions increases the likelihood that youth who are experimenting with smoking will become regular smokers.¹⁰

- Tobacco companies use promotional offers to target groups that are more sensitive to higher prices, including youth who are experimenting with smoking and potential quitters.^{11,12} The tobacco industry knows that greater exposure to tobacco promotions increases the chance that kids will begin smoking.¹³
- Adolescents frequently exposed to cigarette marketing in the retail environment are more likely to have ever tried smoking,¹⁴ and adolescent nonsmokers who are more aware of or receptive to tobacco advertising are more likely to later become smokers.¹⁵
- Individuals exposed to tobacco product displays are more likely to smoke and to smoke more cigarettes.¹⁶ An Australian study found that a third of recent quitters experienced an urge to buy cigarettes as a result of seeing a retail cigarette display.¹⁷
- A recent study found that 68 percent of college students' exposure to pro-tobacco messages occurs in the retail environment.¹⁸
- Numerous studies throughout the United States have shown that there are more tobacco retail stores in minority and low-income areas than in other areas.¹⁹⁻²²
- People attempting to quit smoking who live within a short walking distance (about 1/3 of a mile) from the nearest tobacco outlet are less likely to refrain from smoking during a quit attempt than those who live farther from outlets.²³

Tobacco Industry Contracts in the Retail Environment

The tobacco industry spends millions of dollars each year on merchandizing contracts and incentive programs for retailers.

- A 2008 survey of California tobacco retailers found that 90 percent of retailers participate in price promotions or have a merchandising contract with a tobacco company. Tobacco retailers participating in tobacco companies' incentive programs are left with little or no control over the display of promotional items within their store and are required to place ads in prominent locations inside the store.^{21,24}
- In 2008, California stores participating in tobacco industry incentive programs averaged 26.6 cigarette marketing materials per store, compared to 15.9 materials in non-participating stores.²⁴ Participating stores typically have lower cigarette prices due to having more promotional offers available.²⁵
- In 2008, the tobacco industry paid \$481.5 million to retailers to promote cigarette purchases in the store through strategically placed cigarette displays, price discounts, rebates for large volume sales, and other incentives.¹
- Tobacco companies pay retailers to display tobacco products so that the brand name and logo are visible but the Surgeon General's warning is not, thereby maximizing the pack's advertising and visual impact. One study found that 99 percent of tobacco retail stores in Worcester, Massachusetts displayed cigarette packs so that the warning label did not show.²⁶

Tobacco Product Displays

Tobacco product displays are used as an additional form of advertising inside tobacco retail stores. Exposure to displays makes it harder for tobacco users to quit, and is linked to tobacco use initiation among youth and non-smokers.

- Tobacco companies provide incentives to retailers to put up “power walls” – excessive displays of tobacco packages in quantities that far exceed what is needed for short-term sales. These displays are commonly visible as a backdrop to the cash register and have a strong visual and mental impact on youth, distorting their perceptions about the popularity, accessibility, and acceptability of cigarettes.^{27,28}
- Point-of-sale cigarette displays promote impulse purchases. A survey of shoppers who bought cigarettes found that displays influenced nearly four times as many unplanned cigarette purchases as planned purchases.²⁹ Another study found that a quarter of smokers sometimes buy cigarettes on impulse as a result of seeing a cigarette display.¹⁷
- Smokers who are more sensitive to point-of-sale displays – those who are more likely to notice displays, impulsively purchase tobacco after seeing a display, or decide on a brand based on point-of-sale displays – have been found to be significantly less likely to have quit smoking over an 18-month period.³⁰
- Seeing tobacco product displays also increases the likelihood of youth starting to smoke.²⁷ Adolescents who frequently visited the kinds of tobacco retail stores that have the greatest amount of cigarette advertising and product displays were more than twice as likely to start smoking than those who went to these stores less than once a week.³¹

Price Promotions in the Retail Environment

The tobacco industry uses a combination of advertising, packaging, pricing, and promotional strategies to make cigarettes and other tobacco products more appealing and affordable to youth and low-income populations.

- The tobacco industry manipulates the price of tobacco at the point of sale through price promotions, which have the potential to offset the effects of cigarette price increases and other efforts of tobacco control programs.³²
³³ Price promotions are heavily advertised, and encourage tobacco use among price-sensitive groups like youth and people of lower socioeconomic status.³⁴
- Today, point-of-sale price promotions are one of the most important marketing tools that tobacco companies have for promoting their products.^{35, 36}
- Tobacco companies spend a large share of their budgets on discounts paid to retailers to lower the price of cigarettes for consumers, such as “dollar-off” and “buy-one-get-one-free” offers. Price discounting was the largest category of industry spending on cigarette advertising and promotions in 2008. It totaled \$7.17 billion, and accounted for 72.1 percent of all dollars spent to advertise and promote cigarettes in 2008.¹
- Retail promotions typically last about one to three months with some cigarette products usually found “on sale” at any given time. Tobacco companies conduct these price-lowering promotions because they know that multi-pack discounts generate more sales and that small retailers typically could not otherwise afford to put tobacco products on sale.³⁷

Tobacco Advertising and its Impact on Youth Uptake of Tobacco

Tobacco advertising and marketing in the retail environment influences kids to start smoking.

- Studies have shown that kids are three times as sensitive to tobacco advertising as adults, and youth are more likely to be influenced by cigarette marketing than by peer pressure. In addition, one third of underage experimentation with smoking can be attributed to tobacco industry advertising and promotion. The impact is substantial, as 4,000 kids try smoking for the first time each day.²
- A study of California middle school students found that two-thirds reported at least weekly visits to stores that typically contain tobacco advertising. These students were 1.5 times more likely to try smoking than their peers. Youth who had access to price promotions were also more likely to move from experimentation to regular smoking.³⁸
- California stores where adolescents shop frequently display almost three times more marketing materials for the most popular cigarette brands among youth and devote significantly more shelf space to these brands compared to other stores.³⁹
- In a study of 600 ninth-graders, those who saw photos of stores with tobacco advertising believed that a greater number of stores would sell them cigarettes, compared to those students who saw only photos of stores with no tobacco advertising.²⁷
- Adolescents who saw an advertisement for a particular cigarette brand had a more positive image of a smoker of that brand than adolescents who did not see an ad.⁴⁰
- A Minnesota study found that neighborhoods with a high percentage of youth had lower prices for premium tobacco products.⁴¹
- Youth who live where cigarette prices are lower and where there are more tobacco advertisements and promotions are more likely to smoke.⁹ Reducing exposure to tobacco marketing and promotions in the retail environment may therefore lead to lower youth smoking rates.

The Tobacco Retail Environment Near Schools

The number of tobacco retail stores located near schools is linked to youth smoking.

- A study of California high school students found that the prevalence of current smoking was higher at schools in neighborhoods with five or more tobacco outlets than at schools in neighborhoods without any tobacco outlets.⁴²
- Another California study found that the higher the density of stores that sell tobacco near high schools in urban areas, the more likely the students were to be experimental smokers.⁴³
- A Massachusetts study found that storefront advertisements in a low-income, minority community were more likely to occur within 1,000 feet of a school.⁴⁴
- Researchers in Canada found that the more tobacco retailers there were in proximity to a school, the more likely student smokers were to buy their own cigarettes.⁴⁵
- Tobacco promotions in Canada are more likely to be found in stores close to a school and in neighborhoods with a lower median household income.⁴⁶

The Tobacco Retail Environment and its Impact on Priority Populations

The influence of the tobacco retail environment is strongest in low-income and minority neighborhoods.

- California communities in lower socio-economic neighborhoods and with a higher concentration of convenience stores have significantly higher rates of smoking.²²
- Between 2002 and 2005, the amount of retail cigarette advertising and sales promotions in California increased more rapidly in neighborhoods with a higher proportion of African Americans.⁸
- African Americans living in California neighborhoods with a high proportion of youth aged 10-17 years are exposed to more menthol advertisements in retail stores and price-lowering discounts for the leading brand of menthol cigarettes.⁴⁷
- Massachusetts studies have found that storefront tobacco advertising is more prevalent and advertised prices are lower in predominantly low-income, minority communities. Mentholated brands are marketed more frequently in low-income, urban communities.^{44, 48}
- The price of menthol flavored cigarettes, a tobacco product popular with African Americans, was lower in Minneapolis neighborhoods with large minority populations than in non-minority areas. This finding suggests that the tobacco industry uses price-reducing strategies to target minority populations.⁴¹
- An Iowa study found a higher density of tobacco retail stores in areas with lower median household income, areas with a higher percentage of African American residents, and areas with a higher percentage of Latino residents.²⁰
- An Oklahoma study found that residents of low-income, minority neighborhoods are exposed to significantly more point-of-sale tobacco advertisements than residents of higher income, predominantly white neighborhoods.²¹
- Tobacco retail stores in rural areas across the United States tend to have the lowest prices and the highest prevalence of tobacco promotions and advertising.⁴⁹

Tobacco Sales in Pharmacies

Many pharmacies sell tobacco products alongside medications to treat illnesses related to tobacco use.

- According to a recent Los Angeles study of 250 randomly selected community pharmacies, over 32 percent sold cigarettes, the leading cause of preventable death and disease in the United States.⁵⁰ Traditional chain pharmacies were far more likely to sell cigarettes than independently owned pharmacies: 100 percent of chain pharmacies sold cigarettes compared with just 10.8 percent of independent pharmacies.⁵⁰
- Three out of four pharmacists who work in pharmacies that sell cigarettes feel this practice contradicts their professional values.⁵¹
- Overall, more than 80 percent of licensed pharmacists are strongly opposed to selling tobacco in pharmacies and believe that the pharmacy profession should focus more on preventing tobacco use initiation and promoting tobacco cessation.⁵²

- Between 2005 and 2009, U.S. cigarette sales in pharmacies increased even as total cigarette sales decreased. If pharmacy cigarette sales continue to grow at the current rate, nearly 15 percent of all U.S. cigarette sales will take place in pharmacies by 2020.⁵³
- California communities have the legal authority to enact policies to prohibit the sale of tobacco products in pharmacies. In 2008, San Francisco became the first city in the U.S. to do so.⁵⁴ Other cities that have since followed suit include Richmond, California, as well as Boston and Needham, Massachusetts.

Other Tobacco Products in the Retail Environment

The tobacco industry is increasingly promoting non-cigarette tobacco products, such as moist snuff, snus, and dissolvable tobacco products. The products are not currently subject to many of the regulations on cigarette sales, pricing, and advertising.

- In just one year, tobacco-industry spending on smokeless tobacco advertising and promotion increased by 33 percent, from \$411.3 million in 2007 to \$547.9 million in 2008.⁴ Point-of-sale smokeless tobacco advertising spending increased by nearly 90 percent, from \$29.3 million in 2007 to \$55.3 million in 2008.⁴
- The dramatic increase in smokeless tobacco advertising and promotion is mirrored by increases in smokeless tobacco sales.⁴ In California, sales of non-cigarette tobacco and nicotine products have risen dramatically over the last decade, from \$77.1 million in 2001 to \$210.9 million in 2011.⁵⁵
- A 2011 Minnesota study found that one in five stores licensed to sell tobacco had advertisements for smokeless tobacco. Gas stations and convenience stores had more than double the rate of smokeless tobacco ads at 44 percent, as well as the most ads per store, with 10 percent of stores containing more than five ads for smokeless tobacco.⁵⁶
- A 2011 study found dissolvable tobacco products in 46 percent of tobacco retail stores in a test market in Indiana. Advertisements were found in 84 percent of stores that carried the product, and appeared to be targeting current smokers.⁵⁷
- A 2010 study of tobacco retail test markets in Ohio, Texas, Indiana, and Oregon found that 64 percent carried snus. Marlboro snus was consistently placed next to cigarettes, and 94 percent of stores that sold the brand placed advertisements for it within six feet of the register. Triumph® snus was offered free with a cigarette purchase in 20.8 percent of the stores that carried it.⁵⁸
- While cigarette flavorings other than menthol were banned under federal law in 2009, other tobacco products are still available in an assortment of flavors that appeal to children. Little cigars, cigarillos, smokeless tobacco, and dissolvable tobacco products are available in flavors such as apple, cherry, chocolate, and vanilla.⁵⁹⁻⁶²
- Sales of little cigars and cigarillos have steadily increased even as large cigar and cigarette consumption has decreased. Little cigar sales increased by 240 percent and cigarillo sales by 150 percent between 1997 and 2007.⁶² Two factors contributing to this rise in popularity are that these products are sold individually and are available in a variety of flavors, which makes them more affordable and more appealing to youth.⁶³

- In a 2010 Maryland study, over 79 percent of underage high school students who used tobacco reported using a product other than cigarettes, and nearly three-quarters of these students reported smoking cigars. Over 75 percent of underage high school cigar smokers reported smoking flavored cigars while only two percent of adult cigar smokers currently smoked flavored cigars.⁶⁴
- Cigarillos are often sold one at a time for under 70 cents each, less than the price of a candy bar. This makes them much more attainable for youth and other price-sensitive groups.⁶⁴
- The use of hookah – water pipes used to smoke tobacco - increased in California by more than 40 percent between 2005 and 2008. Nearly 25 percent of all young men reported having tried hookah in 2008.⁶⁵
- As with many other non-cigarette tobacco products, hookah comes in a variety of flavors that appeal to kids, including coconut and watermelon.⁶⁶
- Hookah bars are increasingly popular in California, many falsely claim to be exempt from the State’s smoke-free indoor air law.⁶⁷

What Can We Learn from the Experiences of Those that Have Implemented Restrictions in the Tobacco Retail Environment?

Educating retailers isn’t enough to reduce illegal sales to minors. Strong policies must be adopted and enforced.

- Enacting a law prohibiting sales to minors without sufficient enforcement is not effective in reducing youth tobacco use.⁶⁸
- Programs focused solely on educating tobacco vendors about sales to minors without enforcement programs are not effective in reducing tobacco use among youth older than 12 years of age.⁶⁸
- Giving retailers information is less effective in reducing tobacco sales to minors than active law enforcement.⁶⁹
- A Minnesota study found that restricting youth access to tobacco through local ordinances reduces adolescent smoking in the community.⁷⁰

Restricting the amount and location of point-of-sale tobacco product displays may not be sufficient to prevent exposure. Banning tobacco displays outright may be more effective and does not result in a loss of revenue for businesses.

- A 2008 study of retailer compliance with a New Zealand law that imposes restrictions on the amount and location of point-of-sale tobacco displays found that 64 percent of stores had at least one violation. Researchers concluded that a complete ban on retail displays of tobacco products is likely to be a more effective and enforceable policy than a partial ban.⁷¹
- Canada, Ireland, and most of Australia have prohibited the display of tobacco products in stores and consequently have seen a decline in youth tobacco use. Local businesses have not experienced any significant economic impact.⁷²

- After implementation of a ban on point-of-sale tobacco product displays in Ontario, Canada in 2008, the number of tobacco promotional materials, including signs, countertop displays and power walls, was substantially reduced.⁷³ A recent Canadian study found that both smokers and non-smokers strongly support the ban on tobacco product displays at the point of sale.⁷⁴
- Immediately after its implementation, compliance with a 2009 law prohibiting point-of-sale tobacco displays in Ireland was very high and the law was well supported. In addition, after the law took effect fewer children believed that more than 20 percent of teenagers smoke, an indication that the law has helped de-normalize smoking among youth.⁷⁵
- A 2011 economic study in Ireland found that removing tobacco promotional displays at the point of sale did not result in a loss of revenue from cigarettes sales for retailers in the first year after implementation. Since the policy aims to reduce the influence of advertising on children, the impacts on sales rates are expected to occur over a longer time period, allowing retailers time to adapt.⁷²
- In New York, two supermarkets, Price Chopper and Hannaford, have voluntarily removed tobacco products from sight by changing their display cases from clear to opaque. Product prices are displayed in black and white with no promotional material.⁷⁶

Banning flavored tobacco products and eliminating the sale of single little cigars and cigarillos limits their appeal and accessibility to youth and are policy options that have been upheld in court.

- In 2007, Maine became the first state in the United States to pass a law prohibiting the sale or distribution of flavored cigars, with the exception of premium cigars.⁷⁷
- In 2009, New York City passed a law banning the sale of nearly all flavored smokeless tobacco products. Following a legal challenge by US Smokeless Tobacco Company, a federal court upheld the city's ban. The court affirmed that local governments have the power to pass regulations that are stronger than the federal law, including restrictions on the sale or distribution of tobacco products.^{78, 79}
- In January 2012, the City of Providence, Rhode Island, passed an ordinance banning almost all flavored tobacco products.⁸⁰
- In 2008, two communities in Maryland passed laws that banned the sale of individual cigars. The policy adopted in Prince George's County was upheld in court and ruled constitutional.⁶³
- In 2009, the city of Baltimore passed a policy banning the sale of individual cigars priced less than \$2.50 each. Cigars can be sold in packs of five or more or sold individually if their price is more than \$2.50 apiece.^{63, 81}
- In November 2011, the city of Huntington Park in Los Angeles County became the first city in California to adopt a policy prohibiting the sale of any kind of single cigar and requiring all cigars to be sold in their original packaging.⁶³

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